DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 252 863 CS 208 732

AUTHOR Edwards, Bruce L., Jr.
TITLE The Politics of Nonliteracy: Logocentrism in the Classroom.
PUB DATE Nov 84
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (74th, Detroit, MI, November 16-21, 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Improvement; *Educational Philosophy; *Educational Theories; Interpersonal Communication; *Literacy; Oral Language; Reading Instruction; Reading Skills; Student Motivation; *Student Needs; *Teacher Student Relationship; Teaching Methods; *Writing Instruction; Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

The conventional notion of the term "literacy" is rather narrow. Harvey Graff's work demonstrates that literacy in Western society not only means the ability to read and write, but also takes in a profusion of values and beliefs including empathy, innovativeness, and achievement. By contrast, a term such as illiterate comes to represent social conditions such as poverty, disease, and lack of intelligence. It is easy to forget that there have been great civilizations that did not depend upon universal literacy for stability and control. Walter Ong suggests that literacy should be seen both as a technology and as a pattern. Writing, for instance, can be seen as a technology, as a way of getting something done using words. Literacy makes possible analytical thinking processes unachievable in an oral culture, which relies primarily on memory to store information. Because literacy involves a cognitive act, it is not only a technology but also a pattern or perspective through which the world is viewed. Since writing allows knowledge to be detached from personal memory and put in a text accessible to those who know the code, it is tempting to assume that the written word is a medium more capable of conveying human experience than speech. This attitude is what Jacques Derrida calls logocentrism, and he suggests that it colors the Western view of literacy. Teachers, acting as if literacy should be equated with human worth and dignity, convey the impression that illiterate students should learn to read and write so they can communicate with their teachers. Teachers rely excessively on books to teach writing, putting students through meaningless mechanical exercises and expecting them to figure out how to proceed. Better results can be achieved when the teacher works directly with students on their writing, helping them to learn by watching and doing and using the textbook only as a supplement. (RBW)

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THE POLITICS OF NONLITERACY: *LOGOCENTRISM* IN THE CLASSROOM

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Bruce L. Edwards, Jr.
Assistant Professor of English
Bowling Green State University
Bowling Green OH 43403

As a composition teacher and as one who teaches graduate courses in composition theory, I confess a growing ambivalence about the notion of literacy. This ambivalence is fostered in part by my reading of three contemporary scholars whose inquiries into the nature of literacy call in question much of our classroom practice as well as our conception of the writing process. In my remarks this afternoon I would like to summarize the contributions of Harvey Graff, Walter Ong and Jacques Derrida, three scholars somewhat disparate in their training and emphases, to our understanding of literacy and to suggest how their formulations might inform and reform the classroom teaching of writing and reading skills.

Graff's work demonstrates that in Anglo-American culture, literacy means not merely the seemingly simple ability to read and write but encompasses a constellation of values and beliefs far beyond what might be attributed to it. These values range from

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empathy, innovativeness, achievement, orientation, "cosmopoliteness," information and media awareness, national identification, technological acceptance, rationality, commitment to democracy, to opportunism, linearity of thought and behavior and urban residence! (302)

By contrast, such terms as *illiterate* or *subliterate* come to represent antonymic social conditions: poverty, disease, anti-technology, anti-capitalism, lack of intelligence, lack of ethical restraint. Indeed, in many cases, literacy is so closely identified with humanness and civilization that the nonliterate person is sometimes seen as an ignoble savage or moral retrograde. To use C. S. Lewis's term, our "chronological snobbery" prevents us from recalling that there have been great civilizations and empires predating our modern world which did not depend upon universal literacy for stability and control.

As a corrective to this highly honorific use of the concept "literacy," Graff, Ong and others urge that literacy must be seen both as a *technology* and as a *paradigm*. Writing is a technology, according to Graff, in that it is "a set of techniques for communications and for decoding and reproducing written or printed materials" (307). In other words, the invention of the alphabet and the development of morphology and syntax typify the evolution of a technology, a means to get something done--in this case, with written words. Walter Ong amplifies this concept of literacy as technology in suggesting that literacy makes possible a more interior, analytical means of cognition than is possible in primarily oral cultures:

> With such external, technological equipment (as clay tablets, skins, paper, styli, brushes, pens, inks), the mind can understand kinds of activities previously impossible. The analytically organized treatise, such as Aristotle's *Rhetoric* or *Physics*, can come into existence. There is no way for an oral culture to go through the kind of elaborately analytic thinking processes that constitute such work. (186)

Because writing is not merely transcribed speech, but requires a cognitive act peculiar to itself, literacy is not only a technology but also a *paradigm*, a distinct perspective through which the world may be viewed. Ong has coined the word "noetic" to describe the range of perceptual and cognitive styles a human being evinces. In primarily oral cultures, for instance, one noetic feature is that the memory is the seat of knowledge: one knows what one can remember--as opposed to, say, locating knowledge and the authority behind it in a printed book. Likewise, the wisdom of a primary oral culture is not stored in libraries, but in persons, the wise man and the high priestess, hence the respect reserved in many Eastern cultures still today for the elderly.

The movement from orality to literacy is thus a movement from one noetic process to another: we come to know things and come to know ourselves in differing ways. Writing, in an even more dramatic way than speech, allows for transcendence of self, for the detachment of knowledge from personal memory into a self-existent text, accessible primarily--if not exclusively--to those

who know the code. It is not surprising that the industrialized and technologized West has come to prize the analytic and highly abstract above the intuitive and concrete.

But one cannot derive the "ought" from the "is"; that literacy is a useful, productive human technology and that it is both the product and the process of an interiorization in human consciousness, does not therefore give it a privileged status in human relationships, nor does it offer particularly compelling insights into a definition of humankind. It is here I would like to introduce my third witness, French deconstructionist philosopher, Jacques Derrida, who has given us a disarming critique of Western "logocentrism." By logocentrism, Derrida refers to the assumption that the written word is prior to and superior to the spoken word, the proposition that the written word is a medium capable of conveying a surer or truer guide to the meaning of human experience than speech. Derrida thus challenges the primacy of literacy in the West as a measure of intelligence, social status, and human potential.

To bring all of this into sharper relief for teachers of writing, let me suggest to you that the work of Graff, Ong and Derrida does more than elucidate the fact of our narrow and often impoverished views of literacy. I believe their work provides the groundwork for a sustained and meaningful critique of the way we teach literacy and hints at how our classrooms might become more conducive to the teaching of literacy. I place before you the paradox that in order to help our students move from their secondarily oral noetics into the literacy we hold dear, we must

refuse to elevate literacy above all other human qualities and must avoid equating it with the human worth and dignity.

We now live, as Walter Ong notes, in an epoch of secondary orality, an age in which other media have begun to obviate the usual and past functions of the written and printed word. You and I might characterize our times as postliterate. Our students come to us distracted by competing media, those other than the written word, and therefore distrust the emphasis and value we place on primary literacy. Another way of saying this, to borrow again from Derrida, is to say that our students enter a thoroughly *logocentric* classroom. I can illustrate this best with an anecdote.

I recently asked my graduate students why they thought we taught literacy the way we do, refering primarily to the paper-grading pathology we all seem to susbcribe to. I got one particularly telling response. One said, sardonically, "So they can communicate with us." *So they can communicate with us.* The image is this: we extraterrestrials have invaded this planet and before we can pursue our mission we must equip our captives with the special vocabulary and thought-forms necessary to keep them subdued. While we exult in the joys of literacy--the exquisiteness of a phrase well-turned, the buoyancy of a mind self-consciously examining itself--our students know only the emptiness of it, the baffling marginalia of articulate teachers who know only too well what is wrong with them. What we hold out

to our students as power and prestige too often turns out to be a prison-house of language which they cannot enter and from which we cannot escape.

Instead of building bridges to their secondary orality, our xenophobia compels us to build walls. Our very articulateness exacts its price; because we can explain writing gaffes so effortlessly and, further, can prescribe equally facile remedies for them, the loneliness of nonliteracy is masked from us. We are so deeply entrenched in our literate worldview and cut off from what Ong calls "the human lifeworld" that when we hear the sound "tree," we think not of the living Maple or Elm in our front yard but the letters T-R-E-E. But the logocentrism of our classrooms is betrayed in a much more flagrant way than the way we evaluate student texts: namely, our use of the textbook in the teaching of writing.

New Criticism taught us that *the book*, *the text* was all, that we, with perspicacious/analytical reading, could unlock all the mysteries of the text--to exclusion of authorial intention or reader response, in other words, oblivious to the processes of literacy. Our New Critical training has implicitly fostered a composition pedagogy which encourages attention to the product of literacy and detachment from the process itself--a generation or two of composition teachers has been taught that pedagogy should not mean but be, that writing could be taught with books, divorced from the practice of writing.

But the book is a stillborn technology for effecting the literacy skills we seek for our students. Writing is, as we have

come to say, both process and product. Our logocentrism gets in the way of our students' potential appropriation of the tools of literacy because writing textbooks encourage learners to reduce the reception of literacy to the mechanical manipulation of certain abstractions. The composition textbook is a literal oxymoron. Textbooks purport to be the way into an experience when instead they are the way out of it. Every moment spent in analysis is a moment lost to writing.

Our logocentrism also affects the way we perceive and gauge progress and composition research, prodding us to create the appropriate fictions to suggest that our writers have improved when they leave our classrooms. If we can talk of increasing syntactic maturity by a number of T-units, or can point out a greater density of cohesive ties, as Humpty Dumpty said, there's glory for you. The appearance is more powerful than the presence. Each of these measurements of writing growth more firmly entrenches us in the literate framework which distances us still further from our students.

Unlike, it seems, most of my colleagues, I do not disdain the label "alchemist" as teacher of literacy, for, in a digitized age, it seems to me to be exactly the right image for us. It is an image of a master Sorceror, a mysterious Worldmaker who takes in apprentices to learn by watching and doing, watching and doing, and not merely by reading and theorizing. The alchemist knows that her apprentices know their stuff when they can cast a spell, not when they can diagram the correct incantation. When I think of such an alchemist, I imagine John Warnock at Wyoming or

Donald Murray at New Hampshire--teachers who have cast the textbook out of the center, and with it, logocentrism, and replaced it a grand alchemy in which the real textbook emerges in the interaction between sorceror and apprentice, apprentice and apprentice. The exchange of power that occurs, the mastery of literacy, is not neither arbitrary nor artificial.

By what entrace does the rhetorical tradition come into the anti-logocentric, textbook-less classroom? It comes in *person*, manifesting itself in the sorceror or sorceress as he or she shares experience, knowledge, facility with literacy. Just as the preliterate world stored its wisdom in the locals who had been around a while, so must composition instructors play the role of the crafty alchemist. When literacy comes in person, through a human being, and not through the sterility of a book, the student is no longer at the mercy of an imperious carpetbagger who continuously appropriates the student's work for himself under the guise of evaluation and in the garb of the extraterrestrial.

If we are serious as a profession about writing as a process and about literacy as a meaningful goal for all our students, we must use our classrooms responsibly as workshops wherein apprentice writers and alchemical instructors cross the bridge of literacy in tandem.

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